

COLUMNISTS

Ssssstay ssssafe around ssssnakes in West Texasssss

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This month, we're talking about snakes, quite possibly the most feared outdoor creature to the uninitiated.

But there is good news on that front. Many things that seem bad at first can often be handled if you know what to do.

For starters, a surprising fact: There are no native poisonous snakes in Texas. However, according to Texas Parks & Wildlife there are 15 species and three groups of venomous snakes that call the state of Texas home - rattlesnakes, pit vipers and North American Cobras.

A snake would be considered poisonous if simply by handling the snake you would be exposed to its toxic venom. The key distinction is how the toxin, any substance that's harmful to a human body in a high quantity, gets into the body.

But a snake must bite and inject its venom.

Four snakes to watch out for are the rattlesnake, copperhead, water moccasin (or cottonmouth) and coral snake.

The term rattlesnake covers several snakes — sidewinder, diamondback, timber, pygmy and others—but all have the tail rattle in common. Each rattler comes in different sizes and with different looks. But if you see (or hear) the rattle, you know what you are up against.

The copperhead lives up to its name. Its head is the color of a new penny, with shades of brown and tan along its body. It's a small snake, a four-footer would be a giant, and prefers to hide in dry leaves or underbrush.

The water moccasin/cottonmouth is more heavy-bodied. It is often dark black but can come in shades of brown or gray as well. The "cottonmouth" moniker comes from the

white color of its inner mouth. It is known to be the most aggressive of the four, but only if provoked.

The coral snake is the rarest and smallest—and has by far the most potent venom. It is a member of the same family as cobras. It has bright-colored bands around its body.

Fortunately, its teeth are so small it typically has to chew to get its venom into its victim.

The good news: Coral snakes are rare here in the Big Country; they prefer a more moist climate. And there has been only one recent fatality in the United States from a coral snake bite—a person who didn't seek treatment.

The coral snake has some non-venomous look-alikes, but it is easy to tell which reptile you have encountered if you remember the following verse:

“Red and yellow, kill a fellow; red and black, a friend to Jack.”

The verse refers to the sequence of colors on the snake. If red and black bands are touching, it is a “friend to Jack”—thus, non-venomous. If red and yellow bands touch — keep away!

If you encounter a venomous snake, what should you do?

First, freeze and locate the snake. Typically, snakes can only strike two or three feet. Hopefully, you are out of range or can move yourself to a safe distance.

The snake is more afraid of you than you are of it. To the snake, you are a gigantic creature. Consider the snake's perspective, it is only a few inches off the ground encountering something 15 to 20 times its size. It doesn't want to attack; its only goal is to get away, or at least avoid being detected. Given the chance, it will remain quiet until you move on.

The bite of any of these snakes is not life-threatening, except perhaps for someone already in a weakened state. But you still need to get to a hospital as quickly as possible. Although not life-threatening, the venom can do major damage and cause intense pain if not treated quickly. Be sure you, or the injured person, understand this as you are rushing to the hospital.

There is always the chance they have suffered a “dry bite”—one in which the snake didn't inject any venom. But it is always better to be safe and check with medical professionals.

The doctors will need a description of the snake, as each requires a different antidote.

All these snakes (except the coral snake) strike with only their fangs. All the other snakes we've talked about bite with their entire mouth. So, if you are seeing a semi-circle of tooth

marks, wash it and go on (unless you think you may have encountered a coral snake; then get moving!). However, if there are only two puncture marks, it is still important to get to a vehicle and get going.

So, get out and enjoy nature. Don't be afraid of the snakes; they want nothing to do with you.

*Upcoming Big Country Chapter of Texas Master Naturalist Events:

Sept. 15: Chapter Meeting

Sept. 17: Cedar Creek Waterway hike. Meet at the trailhead off of East South 11th Street at 7 a.m.

Sept. 18: Audubon Society bird watch, 8-11:30 a.m., Merkel. For location contact the "Big Country Audubon Society" Facebook page. Bring snacks and water.

Sept. 23: Monarch butterflies, Milkweed & More 4 p.m. Downtown library. All ages are welcome!

Oct. 1: Lake hike, Abilene State Park. Be at the Lake Abilene parking area by 9 a.m. Bring water and appropriate footwear for the five-mile hike.

Oct. 1: Star party (weather permitting), Abilene State Park. International Observe the Moon event. Plan to arrive around dusk. Meet near the swimming pool (unless otherwise directed by park staff).

Carl Kieke is a member of the Big Country Master Naturalist program in Abilene. All master naturalists are volunteers interested in the great Texas outdoors. From our backyards to natural spaces across the state, master naturalists are learning, sharing, and protecting our natural resources. To learn more about the Texas Master Naturalist program and how you can get involved go to totxmn.tamu.edu or our local Facebook page @BCTXMN.